

*Engaging in Dialogue When Everything is Not OK*

This week I participated in an interfaith dialogue on “Fundamentalism and Terrorism.” As we each spoke about these issues from the perspectives of our respective religious traditions, I thought I would try to state some guiding principles for addressing the violence and injustice in our world – principles that are especially useful in interfaith and international contexts.

Two such principles seem uppermost. First, criticism begins at home. As a Christian, my foremost responsibility is to examine my own attitudes, behaviors, and practices and those of other members of my own religious tradition before I have anything critical to say about the attitudes, behaviors, and practices of others. As a Christian, I must examine and critique what is done by fellow Christians before I engage in criticism of Jews or Muslims, for example. Likewise, the Jew must first examine and critique fellow Jews, and the Muslim must first examine and critique fellow Muslims.

The Jewish founder of my tradition can be cited in support of this principle: “How can you say to your neighbor, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ while the log is in your own eye? . . . First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye” (Matt. 7:4-5). Moreover, it is known that we human beings tend to give ourselves more slack than we give others. The practice of self-criticism is a greatly needed corrective. This also holds for one’s other identity groups, such as one’s nation. Before I start criticizing the policies and practices of other nations, my first duty is to critique those of my own.

My second principle is, those who hold greater power bear greater responsibility, including responsibility for the prevailing circumstances and their harmful effects. For example, responsibility for the destructive and violent behavior of oppressed groups, however egregious, cannot *all* be laid at the feet of those groups. Those who hold the power that maintains the structures of oppression bear a greater burden of responsibility. Think of slavery in our history. The violence of a slave revolt, while never to be condoned, could hardly be blamed *entirely* on the slaves. Slaveholders and all who supported the socio-economic system with its structural violence that enforced slavery’s continued oppression bore the greater responsibility.

Genuine dialogue requires critique of one’s own identity groups as well as openness to the other.

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